

Including Parents in Evaluation of a Child Development Program: Relevance of Parental Involvement

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Abstract

Program evaluation practices in early childhood care and education have been underdeveloped compared to the larger field of educational evaluation. The inclination not to include parental views in evaluation is mainly a result of the problem of positive response bias. Researchers who study client satisfaction with educational or child care programs find that parental satisfaction ratings are mostly positive. This study helps address the problem by considering the influence of parental involvement and underscores the importance of considering parental satisfaction ratings in program evaluation. Purposive sampling was used. Parents of children in a child development program were given questionnaires assessing parental satisfaction with the program and their perceived involvement in the program. Regression analysis revealed that parental involvement positively predicted a parent's level of satisfaction with the program. To explore the specific areas of satisfaction in greater depth, cluster analysis was used to identify two distinct groups of parents based on their involvement. The differences and similarities between clusters are discussed. Results have implications for researchers, practitioners, administrators, and policy makers.

Introduction

Inclusion of parents in the evaluation of an early childhood program has been questioned because parents are expected to offer subjective impressions rather than professionally informed opinions or objective observations (Hawkins, 1991). Also, parents may be positively biased and distort the results of an evaluation (Gutek, 1978; Lebow, 1982; Larsen, Attkisson, Hargreaves, & Nguyen, 1979; Mitchell-DiCenso et al., 1996; Garland, Haine, & Boxmeyer, 2007). According to Guralnick (1989), because parents are responsible for their child, they should have a voice in program evaluation. We propose that although parents may exhibit a relatively higher level of overall satisfaction, there may be differences in aspects of the program they are satisfied with, based on other variables such as their level of involvement with the program. This study addresses the issue of positive response bias by considering the impact of parental involvement on parents' satisfaction with the program.

Parent Involvement in Early Childhood Programs

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1988) argued that to be effective and have a lasting impact, early childhood programs would need to involve the children's parents and communities, so that all environments affecting children would foster similar goals. Parents' participation in education has been a topic of considerable interest and concern over the past 25 years, but family-school partnerships were the exception, rather than the norm, prior to the 1980s.

Since that time, however, a growing literature has suggested that parental involvement has a positive impact on children's learning and success in school (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Koegel, Koegel, & Schreibman, 1991; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Increasing involvement of parents in their children's education has come about not only through legislation and policy making but also through recognition that parents have a thorough and relevant knowledge about their children's strengths and weaknesses. Since educational reforms in 1986 and 1988, parents have played a more active role in governing schools and in receiving information about their child's progress, and they have gained the right to state a preference for an individual school. Goal 8 of the Goals 2000 Educate America Act instructed schools to "promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional and academic growth of children" (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has stressed the importance of parent involvement and parent-staff communication in its accreditation guidelines for children's programs (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). More recently, the No Child Left Behind Act has made changes to Title I funding requirements, requiring recipients to have plans and activities that facilitate home-school collaborations (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Though the majority of studies showing the positive effects of the involvement of parents in their children's development and school performance have examined the elementary through high school years (e.g., Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein & Dauber, 1995; Epstein, 1996; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Rutherford, 1995), a number of studies of the early childhood years have demonstrated that parental involvement has beneficial and lasting effects on both children and their parents (Marcon, 1999; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Fantuzzo, Perry, & Childs, 2006).

Parents who are involved in their children's schooling exhibit increased self-confidence in their parenting and a more thorough knowledge of child development (Epstein, 2001). Researchers have also claimed that parent involvement in their children's early education increases parents' understanding of appropriate educational practices (e.g., Gelfer, 1991); that it improves children's educational outcomes, especially literacy (e.g., Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Miller-Johnson, 2000; Cooter, Mills-House, Marrin, Mathews, Campbell, & Baker, 1999; Baker, Allen, Shockley, Pellegrini, Galda, & Stahl, 1996); and that it improves parental commitment to schooling (Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999).

Parental involvement also leads to good relationships between children and between staff and children (e.g., Smith & Hubbard, 1988), and good communication between staff and parents is thought to be a prerequisite for high-quality care and education of young children (Doherty-Derkowski, 1995; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000). Parent involvement in early years has been associated with higher achievement levels in elementary and high school (U.S. Department of Education, 1994), lower high school dropout rates (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1994), fewer years spent in special education (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999), and greater social competence (Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000). By now, the importance of family involvement in early childhood programs is well documented (Eldridge, 2001; Epstein, 2001).

Nature of Parental Involvement in Early Childhood Programs

Baker and Soden (1998) reviewed 200 studies on parental involvement and noted that confusion exists among practitioners and researchers regarding what constitutes effective parent involvement. They found that the inconsistency in defining parent involvement across studies makes it difficult to assess cumulative knowledge across studies.

Their conclusions are supported by the differences in suggestions that can be found in the literature. For example, Henderson, Marburger, and Ooms (1986) discussed two types of involvement: a type that supported the school program and another that refers to parents' assistance to their own child. In 1989, Hester proposed five ways of involving parents. In 1991, Greenwood and Hickman proposed five different types of involvement. Epstein (1995) suggested six types of involvement, and in 1999, Akkok proposed three levels of involvement. None of these suggestions for involvement included involvement in evaluation of the program.

Parental Satisfaction as an Evaluation Measure

For many years, researchers have argued that parental measures should be viewed as a component within a comprehensive framework of program evaluation because they augment objective measures of progress toward goals (Grela & Illerbrun, 1998; Schwartz & Baer, 1991). The approach of evaluating the program in terms of parents' satisfaction with a program's progress toward its goals and objectives has been used in some studies (McNaughton, 1994; McWilliam et al., 1995; Lanners & Mombaerts, 2000; Bailey, Scarborough, & Hebbeler, 2003). In these studies, the success of the program was measured in terms of parents' opinions of and satisfaction with the program, in addition to the outcomes for children.

Collection of parent satisfaction information in the evaluation of a program is considered important for several reasons. Parents have the major responsibility and control of a child's development, and their decisions concerning success and failure should be considered important (Bernheimer, Gallimore, & Weisner, 1990; Guralnick, 1989). Understanding parent views (positive and negative) can be used to develop more responsive services and prevent program rejection (Upshur, 1991; Grela & Illerbrun, 1998). We also can learn more about the intended and unintended effects of a program from parents (Zigler & Balla, 1982). However, some researchers have questioned the use of parental opinions as evaluation measures because opinions are "subjective impressions" of progress toward program goals; instead, behavioral evidence has been

recommended for assessing program success (Hawkins, 1991; Lanners & Mombaerts, 2000). Finally, consumer satisfaction data collection from parents can be used to convince other audiences (e.g., funding agencies, administrators) of the usefulness of a program (Scheirer, 1978).

The process of measuring client satisfaction, however, has its own problems. A major issue in the measurement of parental or client satisfaction is the problem of positive response bias. Past research in a variety of areas has demonstrated that satisfaction with social programs tends to be overwhelmingly positive, regardless of the actual services provided (Mitchell-DiCenso et al., 1996; Bailey et al., 2003; Goldring & Shapira, 1993; McWilliam et al., 1995; Zigler & Balla, 1982). Some of the discrepancy in views on parental inclusion in evaluation is likely a result of the appearance of this positive bias in parental satisfaction. Positive bias may result from the way the program is presented to parents, that is, what happens when parents drop off and pick up their child. Often parents are happy with programs because they lack information about the quality of other programs and believe that their program is better than all others (Lanners & Mombaerts, 2000). Other reasons for positive bias include parents' need to believe that their children are receiving good care; equally important may be a limited selection of affordable programs combined with the parents' need to work.

By taking into consideration how other variables affect parental evaluation of the program, more insight can be gained into parents' satisfaction with programs. Commensurate with that concern, links between parent reports of the frequency of communication and intensity of involvement and their satisfaction with care have been suggested in the literature, but the direct relationship between these two variables has not been explored. Studies in the past have independently examined parents' satisfaction and involvement with programs (Fantuzzo et al., 2006; Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003), but efforts to explore the link between these two important and theoretically linked variables have been minimal and confusing.

Goldring and Shapira (1993) found that parents of first- through eighth-graders who are more involved in their children's school are also more satisfied with it. In another study, Fantuzzo et al. (2006) found that parents of younger children were more satisfied with their child's school than were parents of older children. They speculated that this difference was perhaps because classrooms of younger children placed more emphasis on parental involvement than classrooms of older children. They recommended further exploration of these two important variables, namely, parental involvement with programs and parental satisfaction with programs. On the other hand, Griffith (1996) found no relationship between elementary school parents' involvement in school and their satisfaction with it. Further research is therefore needed to clarify the link between these two variables. Also, studies in the past have considered overall satisfaction of parents but have seldom taken into consideration specific factors that may affect overall parental satisfaction with programs. The present study addresses these needs. The nature of parent involvement is considered along with the relationship between involvement and specific types of satisfaction with a program.

Method

Research Design and Sample

This evaluation study used a client satisfaction design. The program under consideration is a child development program associated with a large university; it includes infants, young toddlers, older toddlers, and preschoolers. The purpose of the program is to facilitate overall growth and development of the child by focusing on development in different domains such as physical, social, emotional, cognitive, language, moral, and spiritual development. Surveys were distributed to all 67 parents of children enrolled in the program; 32 were returned, resulting in a response rate of 48%. Respondent age range was from 24 to 53 years ($M = 36$). The majority of the participants were married (78.1%), White/Caucasian (68.8%), female (96.9%), with annual incomes above \$60,000 (56.3%). Most had college or graduate degrees (78%). Child ages ranged from 1 to 6 years ($M = 3.6$ years). When obtaining satisfaction ratings from parents, there is always a possibility that parents' responses will be positively biased; however, parents of children in this program have a history of openness in their expression of both positive and negative views. To promote a lack of bias in responses, parents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity; in addition, children were not linked to their program level. Because the researcher was not officially associated with the program, these assurances were perhaps more veritable.

Procedure

Parents were given a questionnaire that included the following: (1) a cover letter stating that the purpose of the study was to know more about both parent involvement and parent satisfaction with the program and requesting their participation, (2) questions to measure parental satisfaction with the program, (3) questions to measure parental involvement with the program, and (4) questions asking for demographic information. Surveys were handed out by the teachers in each of the classrooms, and the parents were asked to complete the surveys and leave completed surveys in a sealed envelope in a box in their child's classroom.

Measures

Two measures were developed by the first author. In outcome evaluations, it is easier to find ready-made measures of outcomes for the participants. However, to measure client satisfaction with a specific program, it was not possible to use a ready-made instrument because the program itself is unique. In many satisfaction studies, unique measures are developed. Indeed, McNaughton (1994) found that a specific research measure had been developed in the 14 research articles in early intervention that had used parental satisfaction as a dependent variable.

In this study, the satisfaction measure "Parents' Satisfaction with a Child Development Center" was developed as an elaborated version of "The Parent Questionnaire" developed by the National Association of Early Childhood Programs in 1998 as a component of the National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC) program accreditation system (NAEYC, 1991). It consists of 25 items to be rated as positive, negative, or not applicable. The new instrument is based on NAEYC recommendations but contains additional items based on the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria established in 2004 (NAEYC, 2005). These include 10 program standards or accreditation criteria related to early childhood programs, including relationships, curriculum, teaching, assessment of child's progress, health, teachers, families, community relationships, physical environment, leadership, and management. The new instrument includes items from each of the new standards or criteria established. Eleven items from the original family questionnaire were retained, and 22 additional items from new program standards such as curriculum, physical environment, health, families, and some summary items were included. The criteria on "families" also include items related to teacher-family collaboration as well as family involvement in programs. The new instrument asks parents to rate their agreement with the items on a 4-point Likert scale along with a response for not applicable. The scale ranges from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The level of parental satisfaction with the program was judged based on parents' agreement with statements that reflected characteristics of a good-quality program.

The second measure, "Parental Involvement with a Child Development Program," was developed by the first author based on the activities that parents commonly get involved in at child development programs. It included eight items on parental involvement to be rated on a 4-point scale of 1 (*never*) to 4 (*very frequently*). Negatively worded items were reversed before estimating reliability and before summing. Estimated reliability (Cronbach alpha) in this sample was $\alpha = .77$. Logs of parental actual involvement in programs are strongly correlated with parental self-report of involvement (Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004).

Content validity for both measures was addressed by doing a comprehensive review of the literature and talking to people in the field to ensure that all aspects of the concept were included. Two experts in the field of child development reviewed the instruments and concluded that the items were relevant; thus, face validity was deemed acceptable.

In addition to the two measures, the questionnaire included some questions about demographic information for the participating families. Parents were not asked to identify the class their child was in because it might have allowed identification of the family by the teacher and might have inhibited parents from sharing their true perceptions of the program. In addition to these questions, two open-ended questions were included, which gave parents an opportunity to share additional information about the program. The questionnaire was piloted with two parents of children attending other child development programs in the same county.

Results and Discussion

Parental Satisfaction and Involvement Scores

The average parental satisfaction scores ranged from 3.24 to 4.00 with a mean of 3.75, suggesting that, on average, parents strongly agreed with statements reflecting characteristics of a good-quality program. Analysis of individual items revealed that the two items that had the lowest scores were "parents are involved in planning the

assessment for their child and are always informed about assessment information" ($M = 3.19$) and "as a parent, I feel very involved in the program" ($M = 3.28$). The four items with highest scores included "there are ways for parents to take part in the program, such as visiting and helping in the classroom, taking field trips, or sharing a meal/snack" ($M = 3.97$); "the program encourages children to learn actively and allows them to make changes" ($M = 3.94$); "the teachers are kind and friendly" ($M = 3.94$); and "teachers interact with children to know more about their strengths and needs" ($M = 3.94$). Thus, parents were most satisfied with teachers and the opportunities the program created for their child, and least satisfied with their own involvement in the program.

Overall scores on parental involvement ranged from 2.25 to 4.00, with a mean of 3.05. Analysis of individual items showed that the item that had the lowest score was "I volunteer during field trips" ($M = 2.44$). The item with the highest score was "I read parent newsletters prepared and distributed by the center" ($M = 3.69$). Although parents agreed that there were ways that they could take part in the program, such as visiting and helping in the classroom, taking field trips, or sharing a meal or snack ($M = 3.94$), most reported that they rarely volunteered during field trips ($M = 2.42$) or rarely volunteered time and expertise to help the staff and children at the center ($M = 2.45$). Thus, although parents thought there were opportunities for them to get involved in the program, they reported moderate involvement, as is evident on the mean score of 3.31 on the item "as a parent, I feel involved in the program." There could be many reasons for the relatively low participation by parents. For example, in many of these families, both parents worked, and when one parent did not work, that parent often cared for younger children at home.

Regression analysis was used to determine the direct relationship between parental involvement in the program and parents' satisfaction with it. Results revealed that parental involvement positively predicted parental level of satisfaction with the program, $R^2 = 0.18$, $F = 7.206$; $p < 0.05$. This finding is in line with past studies that have revealed that an important predictor of parents' satisfaction is their level of involvement with the program (Goldring & Shapira, 1993). However, as has been true in most other studies, these results did not tell us about the specific nature of involvement. Because we thought that the specific nature of involvement might make a difference in satisfaction, we used cluster analysis to examine this issue.

Cluster Analysis

Items on the parental involvement measure were standardized and submitted to a cluster analysis. Two distinct clusters emerged (see Figure 1). Members of the two clusters differed in their overall involvement with the program. The first cluster consisted of 13 parents. Scores on all types of involvement in this group were below the mean; scores were particularly low on the item "share ideas or suggestions about the program with the teachers." The second cluster consisted of 17 parents. Scores on all types of involvement in this group were above the mean, but they were particularly high on the item "share ideas or suggestions about the program with teachers." Members of this cluster shared ideas or suggestions about program with teachers and tended to spend more time at the center observing children. Mean scores on the involvement scale for the two clusters are presented in Table 1.

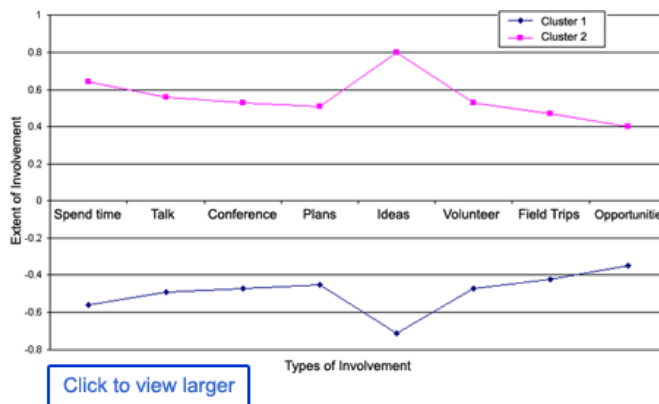


Figure 1. Z-scores for clusters on types of involvement.

Table 1
Parental Involvement Variables

Variable	Mean Score	Cluster 1	Cluster 2
Spend time	2.91	-0.561	0.635
Talk	3.28	-0.498	0.564
Conference	3.59	-0.471	0.533
Plan	3.31	-0.451	0.511
Ideas	2.72	-0.706	0.800
Volunteer	2.53	-0.470	0.533
Field trips	2.44	-0.419	0.474
Opportunities	3.81	-0.351	0.398

When parents were grouped according to clusters, their scores on overall satisfaction differed ($t = -2.26$; $p < 0.03$); parents in the low involvement cluster were least satisfied (see Table 2). The difference was particularly significant for process items ($t = -2.85$; $p < 0.008$; see Table 3). When the process variables were broken down further, it was found that parents in the clusters differed on whether they had enough avenues to be involved in the program ($t = 2.2$; $p < 0.03$) and whether they perceived themselves as being able to give input in policy matters ($t = 2.1$; $p < 0.05$). The importance of process items in determining overall satisfaction with programs has been highlighted in the literature (Donabedian, 1988). It has been found that whereas structure variables such as teacher-child ratio, space in classroom, etc., are important considerations when choosing a program, process variables tend to be important in determining parental satisfaction when children are in programs (Britner & Phillips, 1995). Clusters did not differ on items related to teachers; this finding suggests that irrespective of their level of involvement, parents were happy with the teachers in the program. The mean scores for teacher-related items were 3.922 and 3.911 in Clusters 1 and 2, respectively.

Table 2
Parental Satisfaction Items Summary (Unstandardized Means)

Variable	Mean Score	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	t	p	r_{pb}
Total Satisfaction	3.753	3.680	3.837	-2.259	0.031	0.38
Structure	3.799	3.706	3.883	-1.651	0.109	0.29
Goals	3.830	3.765	3.904	-1.816	0.079	0.31
Teachers	3.917	3.922	3.911	0.153	0.879	0.03
Process-function	3.623	3.484	3.780	-2.845	0.008	0.46
Policy Input	13.688	12.882	14.600	-2.078	0.046	0.35
Welcoming Attitude	22.344	21.824	22.933	-1.950	0.061	0.34
Avenues of Involvement	7.781	7.589	8.000	-2.235	0.033	0.38
Satisfaction Summary	3.865	3.804	3.933	-1.212	0.235	0.22

Table 3
Results of Comparisons of Clusters on Satisfaction
Variables
(Standardized Means)

Variables	Mean	t	p
Total Satisfaction		2.4	.02
Cluster 1	-.3525		
Cluster 2	.3995		
Avenues for Involvement		2.2	.03
Cluster 1	-.3492		
Cluster 2	.3958		
Policy Input		2.1	.05
Cluster 1	-.3279		
Cluster 2	.3716		

A point to be noted is that the difference between clusters on the variable *welcoming attitude* reached only marginal significance ($p < .061$). Past studies have shown significant relationships between parental "welcome status" and their involvement with the program (Hurley, 1999). It was therefore expected that parents who were more involved with the program probably felt comfortable visiting the program and perceived the center staff as being welcoming. However, although theoretically the variable *welcoming attitude* seemed important, statistically it was not. A power analysis revealed that with this small sample size, we had less than 30% power. With a larger sample, we could expect a significant difference between the cluster of most involved and the cluster of least involved parents on their feelings of being welcomed. That is, these results do not entirely support the conclusion that welcoming attitude is unimportant to parental involvement and satisfaction.

Implications

The quality of program evaluation practices in early childhood education has been an important concern of many researchers, and most consider these practices underdeveloped compared to the larger field of educational evaluation (Spodek, 1983; Spodek & Saracho, 1997; Travers & Light, 1982). The findings of this exploratory study underscore the importance of considering parental satisfaction ratings in program evaluation. The study also highlights the need for considering other variables that may be associated with parental evaluation of a program.

The inclination not to include parental views in evaluation has been mainly a result of questions of its usefulness given the problem of positive response bias (Gutek, 1978; Lebow, 1982; Larsen et al., 1979; Mitchell-DiCenso et al., 1996; Garland et al., 2007). This study helps address this problem by considering the influence of parental involvement. Clustering parents based on their involvement made it possible to be more specific about their satisfaction. The cluster of parents who believed that they shared ideas and suggestions with the child's teacher tended to be more satisfied with the program. Overall, parents who believed they were more involved in the program were also more satisfied with it. Of course, it is also possible that parents who are most satisfied will be inspired to be more involved. The direction of the effect is not as important as recognizing that satisfaction and involvement are to some extent co-dependent.

Studies in the past have looked at satisfaction and involvement independently (Kontos & Dunn 1989; Zigler & Balla, 1982; Spann et al., 2003). This study clearly makes the link between these two and highlights the important fact that we need to consider the complexity of both satisfaction and involvement. Although parents may exhibit a relatively high level of global satisfaction, there may be differences in specific aspects of a program that they are satisfied with. Long ago, Gutek (1978) had suggested that an important strategy to improve satisfaction is to consider facet-specific aspects of satisfaction rather than global satisfaction. Also, there may be specific differences in the satisfaction levels of parents who are involved with the program from those who are not. Therefore information other than parents' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the program needs to be taken into consideration.

One of the interesting observations of these results is that they were obtained in a fairly homogeneous group of parents. All parents were generally satisfied, and they were all involved at about the same overall level. However, with the cluster analysis, we were able to tease out the specific ways in which they differed. In another group of parents, the specific differences might not be the same. However, it is clear that if those who direct programs want to understand the perceptions of parents, they will need to look beyond global measures, regardless of how homogeneous their population seems to be.

These results have implications for researchers, practitioners, administrators, and policy makers. Although it may seem that parental perceptions are biased (Hawkins, 1991), they nevertheless are important considerations in determining program quality. Although some subjective bias will always be an issue, parents' involvement in evaluation is still expected to result in a more informed perspective on a program. Program administrators and practitioners therefore need to continue involving parents in the evaluation of programs. It is not suggested that parental satisfaction replace the use of objective outcome measures in the evaluation process—different purposes are served by each of the two approaches (Grela & Illerbrun, 1998), and the approaches can complement each other.

It is logical to assume that parents who are involved in their child's program will be more qualified to evaluate than those who are not, but it is also possible that involvement is something of a double-edged sword for evaluation. When parents are involved in a high-quality program, their satisfaction is most likely to be high. In the case of this study, the program was a model program associated with an institution of higher learning, and parents were generally satisfied. On the other hand, the more involvement parents have in a poor-quality program; it is possible that their satisfaction will be lower because they know more of the problems. Further research is needed to explore this possibility. Indeed, because it may be the most satisfied parents who are willing to participate in studies, it might be desirable to focus a study on dissatisfied parents. Parents who are very dissatisfied may be quite different from parents who are just a little satisfied. That is, they may constitute a qualitatively different group.

This exploratory study suggests the possibility of a link between parental satisfaction and parental involvement in programs; however, it needs to be replicated with a larger and more diverse sample to make it more generalizable and to make it possible to tease out more of the subtle differences among parents. Parents in this study were mainly Caucasian and had a high level of education. They were also mostly female and married, and they had relatively high incomes. Also, many different kinds of programs representing a variety of types and a variety of family income levels need to be studied. We may assume that parents are more satisfied with high-quality programs, but that is not necessarily the case. Other aspects of programs may be more important. This study provides just a hint that parent involvement is such an aspect.

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